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Voyages of self-healing: Autobiographical therapeutic performance in the diaspora

ABSTRACT

This article describes the reflections and insights attained through the process of developing and performing autobiographical therapeutic performances (ATPs) in the diaspora, by discussing the experiences of three Spanish-speaking dramatherapists who migrated to the United States and Switzerland. The pieces were created in the context of their dramatherapy trainings: Cuban-born Idalmis García graduated from the drama therapy programme at NYU, Spaniard Ramón Guitart from the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) in San Francisco, and Mexican-born, Elke Jorzyk, trained at the Swiss Dramatherapy Institute. Their ATPs were facilitated, either in person or online, by Susana Pendzik, an Argentinian-born dramatherapist with a long history of migration. The article explores themes concerned with cultural identity, language, migration, transgenerational trauma and ancestry as they appear in the ATPs. The authors articulate the need to

KEYWORDS

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recreate one's cultural heritage in the diasporic space and the importance of keeping the connection to one's mother tongue and ancestry for emotional well-being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Autobiographical therapeutic performance (ATP) is a dramatherapy-based, performance-oriented framework that engages therapeutically with personal contents, including subjective experiences, such as dreams or other experiential states (Pendzik 2021). Core issues that are in need of healing are dealt with aesthetically and therapeutically through a creative process that is specifically designed to be performed in front of an audience (Emunah 2020). ATP is a special brand of therapeutic theatre that draws on an individual's personal world as raw material, rather than turning to fictional or universal narratives (Pendzik et al. 2016).

In addition to being a form of theatre and therapy (Emunah 2015), ATPs have been traditionally used in dramatherapy training programmes, frequently to mark some transition, such as 'from trainee to dramatherapist' (Seymour 2016: 203). Emunah et al. point out that the students' utilization of dramatherapy tools in their own ATPs provides them with 'insights into applying these tools' with clients (2014: 94–95). In the United Kingdom, this tradition has been embraced since the mid-1980s and is still practised in training programmes (Dokter and Gersie 2016). At CIIS in San Francisco, performing the special brand of ATP called 'self-revelatory performance', developed by Renée Emunah, is an option offered to students 'as a capstone project for the Master's degree' (Raucher et al. 2024: 264). A similar arrangement is common in NYU. At the Swiss Dramatherapy Institute, the ATP module reflects the passage from the most basic courses into the more advanced stages of training (https://www.dramatherapie.ch).

Self-referential theatre in general, whether autoethnographic or autobiographical, has had a long history of engaging with social issues. Since their inception, these performative modes provided a fertile ground for oppressed minorities, such as women, LGTBQ+, migrants and other marginalized parts of the population, to engage in consciousness raising activism and empowering practices. Inscribed in feminist, postmodern and post-structuralist discourses, these forms evolved into a complex artistic genre that problematizes the social context in which the self is inserted (Pendzik 2016). As Deidre Heddon points out,

> The vast majority of autobiographical performances have been concerned with using the public arena of performance in order to 'speak out', attempting to make visible denied or marginalized subjects, or to 'talk back', aiming to challenge, contest, and problematize dominant representations about those subjects.
>
> (2008: 20)

In a similar vein, speaking about autoethnography, Tami Spry asserts that 'writing the textualizing body through the performative-I requires one to engage the material body in a socio-political context' (2015: 295), and furthermore that this process articulates 'the intersections of peoples and culture through the innersactions of the always migratory identity' (Spry 2001: 706).

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Issues related to diasporic spaces, such as migration, displacement and exile, have been explored through self-referential theatre by artists and theatre activists around the world (Afolabi 2021; Alon and Kuftinec 2022; Kong 2020; Shimon 2017). Natasha Davis, for example, born in former Yugoslavia to a mixed Serbian-Croatian family and several times migrant, uses a wobble board to express the experience of in-betweenness, acknowledging it as a constant condition of exile that can also help to focus and strengthen the body – which is the 'permanent site of trauma' (2022: 50). For Sashar Zarif, born in Teheran to an Azerbaijani immigrant family, his grandmother's drum became emblematic of the family's long history of displacement and migration, while also evoking childhood's memories of his grandmother recreating an imaginary place of her own (2017: 129).

In dramatherapy, ATPs have also been a forum to engage with diasporic experiences. Dramatherapist Ditty Dokter (2023), for instance, devoted a trilogy of self-reflexive autobiographical performances to explore themes like migration and mortality (*Finding Home* 2015), the impact of the Brexit on an EU migrant (*Come or Go* 2017) and migrant mother–daughter links as impacted by the pandemic and citizenship issues (*Fluid Borders* 2021). Armand Volkas (2016) narrates his use of ATP with a South American immigrant to the United States dealing with depression and experiences of abuse and neglect. The performance culminates when she is at the verge of an abyss, not knowing whether she will make it to the other side or not. Although various endings were tried out to prevent this suicidal insinuation, 'her drama refused to be wrapped up neatly in a nice bow' (2016: 123). However, after several months, she decided to perform a continuation of her ATP, in which she manages to cross the abyss, only to find herself in a dangerous jungle, full of Amazonian cannibals and Spanish conquistadores. According to Volkas, in her second ATP, the client was able to explore 'the historical trauma of the subjugation of her ancestors, the South American indigenous people that live within her, as well as her identity as *mestiza*' (2016: 123). Remarkably, only after elaborating images from her diasporic identity, this client could find a restorative ending to her piece.

The concept of *diaspora* encompasses the idea of dispersion in space. Originally, from Greek, the term denotes 'an act of dispersion' or 'group of people who have been dispersed', and it literally refers to the 'scattering of the seed' (Kläger 2015: 3). However, in the last decades, the term's meaning has expanded to encompass multiple dimensions. Rogers Brubaker (2005) points to three main criteria as constitutive of diaspora: dispersion in space, orientation to a 'homeland' and boundary-maintenance. Similarly, Yana Meerzon (2012) suggests that language, identity and the construction of a new narrative constitute some of the main features of diasporic theatre.

However, any attempt to create a solid 'poetics of diaspora' falls short, for cultural identities are a complex, intersectional, construct that underlies our engagement with the diasporic space. As Dokter and Sajnani (2023) theorize, an intercultural paradigm brings into awareness the intersectional nature of cultural identities, encompassing gender, race, ethnicity, religion, class, age, among others. Furthermore, in a globalized world where nomadism, migration, displacement and exile have become the norm, the artistic expressions of these experiences acquire idiosyncratic forms (Meerzon 2012): while some aesthetic manifestations of the diasporic experience may converge, a proper poetics of the diaspora requires a particular context that accounts for other intersectional experiences.

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METHODOLOGY

This article discusses three ATPs that took place in different dramatherapy training programmes: Ramón graduated from CIIS in San Francisco, Idalmis (Ida) from the programme at NYU and Elke is a student at the Swiss Institute of Dramatherapy. Susana Pendzik, herself a dramatherapist and migrant, facilitated all the pieces. The processes of Ida and Ramón were facilitated in individual sessions online and across continents (as Susana was based in Jerusalem). Due to the regulations enforced during the pandemic, Ida's work became a film and was broadcasted online to selected spectators around the world (including her mother in Havana). Ramón performed his piece in a black-box theatre, with a restricted number of attendees physically present as audience and a live broadcast online. Both these pieces were done in partial fulfilment of the MA requirements and are about 45 minutes long. Ida's ATP was carried out as an independent project; Ramón had sporadic meetings with his cohorts and teachers to discuss progress and receive feedback. Although one or two auxiliaries participated in their pieces, both Ida's and Ramón's were rather 'solo' performances – a genre that is quite expected from them in the context of their training. In contrast, Elke's performance was monitored and collectively facilitated by cohort members, several teachers and Susana. Her ten-minute piece was elaborated throughout one semester and presented in person during a two-day intensive, in which all her cohorts performed their pieces to a selected audience of former students and teachers of the programme, as well as people from their close circle of family and friends.

Elke's piece, *Lost in Translation*, revolves around her bicultural experience as a Mexican-German, evoking the intergenerational impact of women in her family, in a journey that involves 'looking for home' as a process that begins as a child in Puebla, Mexico, and culminates in Switzerland as a mother. Ramón's *By Blood (Rv)* is structured as a bullfight and deals with transgenerational trauma, patriarchal society, self-understanding and ancestral connections. *Migrating to Myself* narrates Ida's story of immigration to the United States as a journey of self-knowledge, self-excavation, transformation and empowerment.

The three creative-therapeutic processes followed Susana Pendzik's ATP method (Sajnani and Pendzik 2022), which begins with a series of random 'openings' that aim to sidetrack established thematic patterns, by tapping into contents that are not in the authors' awareness. Next comes 'focusing' on the newly illuminated aspects that need healing and finding suitable art forms that would help to carry out the therapeutic task, while engaging with artistic impasses. Finally, the process involves discovering an ending that offers a 'therapeutic horizon', to provide the author with a living resonance that carries on to actual life, as 'a hint of what becomes' (Pendzik 2013: 20). The process carefully integrates all aspects pertaining to the performance – whether technical, aesthetic or psychological (Pendzik 2016).

After their individual projects were finalized, the four authors embarked on a reflective (collaborative) journey, meeting bimonthly online to share their processes and collectively develop this article. Using some dramatherapy exercises and writing prompts, they discussed their written reflections, offered feedback to each other and integrated their findings.

REFLECTIONS ON THE ATPS

Migrating to Myself *by Idalmis García*

My name is Idalmis García. I am Afro-Cuban, originally from Havana. I moved to New York City in 2013. After seven years in the United States, feeling

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trapped in a cycle of survival, I decided to return to school. While researching new academic paths to forge a future for myself, I discovered dramatherapy. A deep dive into this profession revealed that it was a perfect fit for me, given my background in theatre, TV and cinema. I graduated with a master's in drama therapy in 2020, right in the middle of a global pandemic. My ATP was my graduation thesis and the culmination of my two-year journey to becoming a dramatherapist.

Through the metaphor of the journey, I explored a migration that surpassed the physical plane: this is a story of an internal migration, a deep journey of change and transformation within myself. As I reflect on it three years later, I see how this therapeutic process has helped a new version of myself to emerge. Each session allowed me to explore my journey of migration deeply, delving into my inner child, my shadow self and the place of spirituality as my anchor and healing tool. My body served as the vehicle, guiding me through my subconscious and helping me to create a new map of my experiences: In my experience, my body wrote the script.

Several interventions helped to shape my ATP: a timeline of my life, a scene involving a chorus of betrayed women, an interview with an empowered future version of myself, an embodied conversation with my body and a letter to my mother.

The film

The film begins with images of Havana and New York, accompanied by a voice-over of myself sharing a poem called 'Between Two Islands', which describes my relationship with Cuba and Manhattan:

> La isla de allá, the warm one, the communist one, the crazy one, the home one, the motherland, the one who saw me grow, was dar, dar, dar, dar, te lo doy todo (give, give […] I give you everything)
> […]
> The other island, the cold one, the wild one, the heavy one, the land of many opportunities. ¿Qué quiero para mi? What do I really want? Well, I wanted to belong to something, to someone, I felt lost, I did not know who I was in this new place. I wanted to be free. But what is freedom? What does it mean to be free? Receive, receive, receive.

Drone images of my natal Havana are shown followed by footage of a drone arriving in New York City. Migrating to the Big Apple was a huge shift for me, one that changed my life forever. New York was for me not only the land of many opportunities but also the cold, the distant and at times 'the impenetrable one'. As the drone arrives in New York City, we hear my scream of *Libertad*! Belonging and migration are continuously explored throughout this film.

Freedom is a constant concept during my immigration process. I was born in a communist country, a dictatorship that has lasted over 60 years. Back in Cuba, I felt somehow free when I started doing theatre. On stage, I felt I could be anyone, without judgement. Otherwise, talking about freedom in Cuba can potentially land you in jail. When I decided to emigrate to the United States, I was confronted with this sentiment of being free. I left my home in Cuba, my mother, my loved ones and all my world, to achieve freedom. I wanted to explore the world and expand my horizons. I needed to get away, to separate from all I knew and jump into the unknown. Little did I know what was the real journey that I was about to embark on: the ultimate freedom was to be

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free from those parts of me that did not feel loved. So, the real journey started when I was by myself, trying to adapt to a new world, a new society, a new language. The scream we hear is a cry for liberation from the old patterns of not loving myself: negative self-talk and feelings of unworthiness. That, and a deep desire for belonging.

The scene that follows shows a conversation between me and my 'inner child'. We see shots of two Idas, talking to one another. 'You are safe, trust me', I said to the character that portrays my inner child. We share the need to end the pain of not loving ourselves, dealing with self-esteem issues and the heaviness of carrying intergenerational trauma. The end of this scene shows the two Idas breathing and claiming the energies of our ancestors to show us the way to healing. 'We must die to be reborn again', I claimed.

El viaje *('the journey'): Link to a fragment of the scene here*

The third scene stands out as one of my favourites. It narrates the story of my immigration journey incorporating animation effects: a paper plane gracefully navigates the screen, followed by a petite orange car carrying a piece of oversized luggage, larger than the car itself. The animated sequence features a blossoming flower and images of my face shedding animated tears that transform into the contours of Cuba, with the word 'LIBERTAD'. This segment encapsulates the pain and emotions of uprootedness. Simultaneously, my migration marks the commencement of an adventure infused with passion, sensuality and a rebirth.

A collage of images features my Cuban passport, American visa and personal family photographs with my mother, father and childhood friends, symbolizing all that I was leaving behind. Additionally, a newspaper clipping bears the headline: 'Ida García, actuar es vivir', signifying my departure from a distinguished career as a renowned actress in Cuba, to embrace the uncharted journey of an immigrant.

El cuarto de las paredes blancas

The subsequent scene unfolds in what appears to be an immigration office at a US airport: two women, alongside myself, are seated in an empty room, its white walls exuding a stark atmosphere. Their demeanour reflects deep concern about their status.

A woman dressed in all black, inquires, 'why are you here? Are they going to deport you as well?' A close-up of me responds with a simple 'No lo sé' ('I don't know'), setting the stage for an inner monologue conveyed through a voice-over, which encapsulates my nervousness at the uncertainty of my situation. The woman at the end of the line remains silent, her bowed head betraying the weight of her fear. The ambient sound of an office telephone merges with her desperate prayer, appealing to God and the Virgin for protection.

The scene ends in a sequence of shots capturing me amidst these two women, my feelings articulated through a reflective voice-over that unveils the stark truth of my legal situation: I grapple with the internal conflict of not being able to disclose my potential advantage as a Cuban seeking political asylum in the United States. The scene concludes with a prayer to my Afro-Cuban ancestors: 'Maferefun Yemayá, Oshún, my ancestors, Eleguá, my father, help me to get out of this'.

Spirituality was my biggest anchor during my transformation process. I felt truly safe through my connection to my ancestors, knowing that they would

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guide me and protect me. My relationship with spirituality has had ebbs and flows: it is a journey that I decided to take on my own. Spirituality has always shown me a way, which is, in the end, a connection to my deepest instincts. Throughout the ATP process, the ancestors were very present: I believe they came through our embodied work and guided me through.

The ritual

One of my favourite moments of the movie is a ritual scene. It starts with images of a beautiful woman dressed in all white, walking barefoot in a forest followed by me. The scene was filmed in the beautiful location of Harriman State Park. We hold hands while breathing together in some sort of ritual dance. Around us, on the floor, there is a circle of flowers, candles and incense. A lovely lake stands as a witness to the ritual, representing my connection with the sweet waters of my Orisha ancestor, Oshún (Yoruba goddess of sweet waters). The woman leads me into a cleansing ceremony, cleansing my body with flowers and the smoke of sage, as we hear the sound of chimes. The scene ends with images of me transformed, dressed in gold and black, smiling while holding incense and a bell to symbolize the birth of a new me: the goddess within. As the scene ends, I have become the leader of the ritual: now, a man is the receiver, and we move and dance while I clean him with incense and chimes.

Through the preparation and filming of the ritual scene, I was able to embody the goddess within me, inspired and guided by the energies of my Orishas goddesses Yemayá (Yoruba goddess of the sea) and Oshún. The power of their femininity allowed me to embody my own feminine power. Looking back, I believe that my ATP process enabled me to tap into this ancestral powerful knowledge and use it for my healing journey. I decided to believe then, and I decide to believe now. Today, I can attest that most times, I walk in the shoes of the empowered woman I dreamed of becoming: I can be the goddess, the wild woman, the woman I envisioned through this process.

The presence of water

Water connects me to my Yoruba mother ancestors, Yemayá and Oshún. Yemayá is the mother of all the Orishas, goddess of the salty waters, and Oshún is the golden, flirtatious goddess of sweet waters. I firmly believe they both unconditionally protect me and help me through the ups and downs of my life. As a native to an island, I have always been surrounded by water. Water cleanses me, liberates me, empowers me, inspires me. When my father died, I decided to put his ashes in water, so wherever I go, he is with me. Manhattan is also an island, so even though I cannot immerse myself in its waters, the element is there. I need to be close to water. The scene of the ritual speaks to my connection with water through my relationship with Oshún.

Epilogue: A wish to myself

The film ends with drone images over Brooklyn and an image of me dancing with fairy wide wings over a rooftop. These words serve as a wish for my soul, a companion to what will follow after going through this deep and transformative process. A wish became a prayer, a mantra to repeat and to share with others who may need to hear something like this:

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Be soft, remember the truth is within you,
Trust the light you have inside.
Be the light for you.
Be soft,
Just be patient,
Breathe in,
be soft,
Let go,
Surrender,
Fly away.
You are loved.
You belong,
You are enough!

Lost in Translation *by Elke Jorzyk*

As you may guess from my name, Elke, I do have German roots. But that is not everything: I was born in Mexico to a Mexican mother and a German father and grew up most of my life in Germany. However, Spanish and the connection to my Mexican family and culture have always remained essential to me. About nine years ago, I moved to Switzerland where I eventually started my degree in dramatherapy (currently in my last year). While it was an individual process, group members played an important part in it as 'midwives' to each other's ATPs and as supporting performers on stage.

At the beginning of my journey, I felt lost: I was overwhelmed by the task of sharing something deeply personal with an unknown audience, finding something relevant and worth sharing, and condensing it to a seven- to ten-minute performance. It seemed like an incredible challenge. The feeling of being lost was not only the starting point, but it translated into my piece, which is titled *Lost in Translation*, and it deals with the search for my roots and a sense of home, a sense of unconditional belonging. It is a journey into my family's history, a transgenerational story and, at the same time, a journey into my innermost feelings, hopes and dreams. The characters that came forward were the three most important women in my life: my grandmother, my mother and my daughter. After a chaotic, gruelling and emotional search, the final result for me was the realization that 'my place' cannot be attached to any physical location, but to 'my' people. The realization that I will never have this imagined and hoped-for home leaves me with a feeling of longing and sorrow.

From a very early age, I had to translate between relatives from both sides of the family. My memories go back to when I was only 4 years old, and I felt upset not only because I was tired of translating (an activity which I do not particularly enjoy), but because things were getting *lost in translation*. It was not necessarily due to my lack of the correct words but rather the lack of equivalents in either language to specific words, concepts and emotions. This feeling has stuck with me throughout my whole life; the feeling of not being fully understood, of being limited by words, concepts, culture or the willingness to use your imagination.

The performance starts with a total blackout. The audience can only hear the voice of a little girl – my daughter – saying the following in German: 'You know… I was in my mami's belly, and my mami was in my *abue*'s belly; and my *abue* was in her mama's belly'. Apart from being incredibly cute when you

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listen to it, these opening lines set the scene for what is to come: the portrayal of the story of a deeply rooted connection between four women, their circle of life and its repetition. When I started this process, I was thinking about what I wanted and needed to tell about myself. Soon I realized that my story is nothing without them: *Yo soy ellas – ellas son yo* ('I am them – they are me'). The connection between these women goes beyond a sheer blood lineage: many aspects of their individual stories have already and keep repeating themselves through the generations. We all left our place of birth (except for my daughter who is only 5 years old), we were all very keen on becoming a mother and we all had our struggles and pain with that journey. We were all very adventurous and rebelled against our parents, in our own ways we all were looking to belong: to a place, a culture, a society.

After this prologue, the lights go on and you can see some basic props scattered all over the stage: a couple of wooden chairs, some black cushions, a tea cart, a big scarf and a wooden pedestal.

The scene begins with an opening monologue in German and Spanish in which I talk about my longing to belong. Even though I grew up with two homes, Mexico and Germany, I never felt like I really belonged to either but rather got stuck somewhere and nowhere in between. Therefore, I decided on stage to actively start looking for a place to call 'home'. At that point, you can see how I start my 'journey' from the pedestal, climbing over chairs, hopping on the tea cart (with a little help and a lot of concern from my mother and grandmother), jumping from one pillow to the next as if the ground was lava, in search for 'my place'. During the rehearsal, we improvised this scene and very soon I had a huge smile on my face because I could really feel and hear my mum and my grandmother: loud, opinionated and very concerned, but above all, caring and loving Latina mothers.

Finally, I sit down, exhausted, on the scarf downstage. Trying out that spot to see whether this could be 'my place', I start to look around only to see my mother, who is standing upstage, slowly walking over to my grandmother's chair, centre stage. Standing behind the chair my mother covers my grandmother's face with a black veil. During the dress rehearsal, the bells of a nearby church started ringing at exactly that second and made this already very charged moment even more breathtaking. At that moment, it felt like my heart stopped. It was almost as if my *abue* ('grandma') wanted her presence to be known, and being the deeply religious woman that she was, church bells were an obvious symbol. All the feelings I felt when she died came flooding back: helplessness, sadness, anger, despair, incredible pain and deep love. That cocktail of intense emotions nearly overwhelmed me so that I had a hard time continuing the rehearsal. Even though it has been 25 years since I lost the woman whom I used to consider my idol, I have not fully gotten over her passing. What gives me comfort, however, is the fact that even if her life ended, I know now that she still keeps accompanying me in different ways.

For the rest of the performance, my grandmother kept her place on that chair, centre stage. Life would evolve around her, not only during her lifetime but also after death. This performance helped me realize that my *abue*'s position on stage only mirrored her importance in my life.

Picking up my journey, sad and angry, I freeze when my daughter comes on stage and sits down on the pedestal where I started my journey and calls me '*mama*'. The line of adventurous and inquisitive females continues, and it is as if I caught a glimpse into a mirror, a mirror of my past, my present and my future. All of a sudden, the roles are reversed and I myself become

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the loud and very concerned Latina mother, warning my daughter to stay on that pedestal because leaving it would be too dangerous. Finally, I join her, hugging and kissing. I know that where I am right now, physically and figuratively, is not the place I would like to be and therefore, I need to continue that journey, my quest for a 'place to call home'. I know that this is my journey, but I also know that I am taking this journey for her too.

So, I start with the heart-to-hearts that I have with the three women on stage: first my daughter, then my mother and last but not least, my grandmother. Explaining, appreciating and thanking these women. Probably the most emotional moment for me was when I was standing behind my grandmother's chair, put my hands on her shoulder and thanked her; not only for everything she shared with me throughout her life but especially because I know that she has never left me, and she keeps teaching me as my inner guide, my intuition.

After finishing what is essentially my second round around the chair centre stage, now even able to walk normally and touch the ground, I take a step off stage to contemplate the scene and my journey so far. The piece ends with the four women coming together around the chair centre stage, connected, holding each other and I say a Haiku in German:

Heimat	Home
Wo bist du? Kein Ort.	Where are you? No place.
Hier, da – wo ihr seid.	Here, there – where you are.
Sehnsucht ist noch da.	Longing is still there.

When I started with this project, my hope was to learn or understand something new about myself and maybe even discover the roadmap to this place I was so desperately looking for. I do realize, however, that there is no road map. My home is a web, a network of my connections to the people I love.

Do I still feel this longing after an eye-opening ATP journey? Yes, I do. Even though I live in Switzerland now, a country in which 40 per cent of the population has some kind of migration background, the other 60 per cent are deeply rooted in this beautiful land and share a deep sense of belonging to this country. I can not only understand but accept now that my roots will not ever grow deep into the earth but rather spread themselves above earth to connect me to loved ones in different places.

It makes me think of a children's story that I read to my daughter. In it a little girl asks her mother why she has a belly button. The mum smiles, takes her hand and tells her about the invisible thread that connects her belly button with her mum's, her granny's and all those loved ones. Holding on to the idea of these threads, feeling the connections, places me somewhere. It may not be a physical place but it sure is a place that I can call home.

By Blood (Rv) *by Ramón Guitart*

My ATP encompassed multiple therapeutic issues that I had been working on at the time. Like any piece of art, when revisited over time, its meaning changes and transforms in our eyes. But the point is that all the subjects that *By Blood* speaks about had to be dealt with in only 45 minutes! And what was more important was that it needed to be in English. Spanish was not an option. The country and the context in which my ATP took place led to this, as the piece was, in essence, the capstone project – my final exam as

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a dramatherapy student. This is all connected to an important issue that is discussed in my piece; but funny enough, until very recently, I was not fully aware of its impact.

When my second son was about to get born into this tumultuous world, I was already working at the hospital as a dramatherapist, and sorting out my doubts, I got the courage to go to a doctor to confirm what I had suspected for the last five years: I am a person living with ADHD. After a lengthy questionnaire and a thorough interview with a psychiatrist and a nurse, I got the results: Bingo! All my doubts were confirmed: 'Ramón, I said, you always had this; you have been living with ADHD all your life'.

In my ATP, I deal with many topics related to intergenerational trauma within a very specific historical context: to explain to a foreign audience my experience in Spain and America, and how this is connected to my self-healing as a human, my ATP needed to be like an advanced class on the history of Spain in the twentieth century, for people who knew nothing about it. I needed to accomplish that, so that the audience had some historical and chronological background to my story. For a person living with neurodivergence and its potential learning difficulties, and furthermore, in another language, this was challenging.

My ATP is divided into four scenes; the reason for this is that I had initially thought that in a regular bullfighting event, there are four *Corridas* ('bull rounds'). It turns out, there are six. (And this should tell you something about my lack of interest and knowledge concerning this essential national festivity in Spain!) The idea of starting with a bullfight was very intentional. For an American audience, the common stereotype of Spain includes a bull and bullfighters: we can picture Hemingway and Grace Kelly enjoying such an event from the first row of a bullfighting ring, perhaps in Sevilla or Madrid. However, for the 'crunchy granola' community in San Francisco, where my ATP took place, this could be, and it actually was, provocative enough.

The four scenes then became four bulls: the ancestral bull, the child bull, the minotaur bull and the father bull.

The ancestral bull

The curtain goes up and I appear dressed as a bullfighter in the spotlight. After a dramatic silence, I ask the audience inquiringly: 'What did you come to see? Blood? My blood?' Blackout.

The next scene has in the background a picture of a famous Goya painting: *Duelo a Garrotazos*. It depicts two men fighting over a field with heavy sticks. I appear on stage in front of the picture with my auxiliary actor. We start a mute dance representing the results of that fight, in which a brother kills a brother. In the background, the voice-over of Susana Pendzik is heard, reading Genesis 4: 1–17 in Hebrew, Spanish and English, the story of Cain and Abel: two brothers who start a nonsensical fight because of jealousy. This Goya painting has been used by many historians, almost as a foretelling metaphor, to explain the causes of the Spanish Civil War and its consequential the Second World War. It was essential for me to explain to the audience the connections that often occur when international events coincide with our lives in a very personal and profound manner.

The next significant scene is a ritual honouring my ancestors. On the screen are projected pictures of four members of my family who were killed

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during the civil war: on the right side, my mother's uncles; on the left, paternal side, my great-grandfather and my great-uncle. The Republican loyalists assassinated all of them.

In the middle of the stage, two sacks of rice are hung by a rope, symbolizing their lives swinging on that straw rope. I approach the ropes with a pair of scissors and cut them off, while calling out the location, year and the circumstances of their murder. When the sacs drop to the floor, they make a strong 'bang' noise, representing the abrupt circumstances of their murder. Afterwards, there is a blackout, and I re-enter the stage to place a candle next to each of the sacs. I pray for the ones on the maternal side and salute those on the military side, to show respect and honour their lives. This act was very emotional and had a symbolic healing impact on me, because in many Hispanic families you do not talk about trauma, and in mine, this has never been spoken in detail.

The child bull

This bull started with me sitting on a chair, centre stage, talking to the audience and the camera. I remind the audience that my childhood was great and that the love of my family nurtured it. A video starts playing, showing me at age 7–8: my father and I are dancing rock-and-roll; he holds me and throws me up in the air as we dance. Then my grandma appears on the screen, and you see little Ramón trying to get her attention. A record is playing in the background, with the voice of an older woman who sounds like a Witch. I tell my grandma: 'Make the face of the witch grandma, please?' My father also insists as she hesitates. So, when grandma finally makes the grimaces, little Ramón laughs out loud and is all smiles…

As my Old Therapist Self, I can now see those traits of hyperactivity and joy: the most beautiful characteristics of my Young Self, jumping up and around my old grandma, who is sitting patiently on her chair, seemingly saying to everyone: 'He doesn't bother me; he is just a kid!' This scene shows my grandmother's unconditional love, her superb acting skills and my immense capacity for joy as a child.

The next scene represents my constant academic struggles: the continuous school changes, the undiagnosed dyslexia as I was growing up and the experience of different educational systems, left me academically behind for many years. In the role of the 'villain' in this scene, I imitate one of my teachers. Dressed like her and dancing to a Castilian mediaeval tune, I say in a witch-like voice: 'You will see what happens to Ramón when his parents get his academic reports' (evil laughter). This was how profusely I wanted to criticize the mediaeval way of teaching by memorizing stuff and using the same standards for all kids. More knowledge and understanding of neurodivergent brains are still needed. Much work remains to be done in order to destigmatize it in school and, now, also in our workplaces…

A most crucial scene follows, in which I use a dough as a theatrical metaphor for the use of violence. On stage is a lonely table with a flour dough on a red-light background. Church bells are playing. As I approach the table and start banging the dough repeatedly, time after time, I talk to the audience about violence in my family: the fears, the sickness, my parents' intergenerational traumas and the violence experienced. All that intergenerational trauma had to be channelled and modified by my constant pounding. I say to the audience: 'This is the violence I received, and this violence always travels with

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you. You can heal from it, but it is always with you'. The violence that I had suffered but also the violence of all my ancestors.

The minotaur bull

In this bull, I explain my struggles with self-harm and recovery. Representing it is another villain – one with a much softer voice. Some villains, like the Headless Horseman (one of my favourites), are villains in the eyes of society but are not necessarily evil in themselves. They are rather victims of the system: some because of their appearance, others due to a different way of being. The minotaur, for me, was a symbol of self-harm and depression: many people with ADHD suffer from low self-esteem and struggle with some form of self-harm and ineffective coping behaviours.

I stand at centre stage with a cape and a Greek mask, making monster-like noises. At some point, I take off the mask and start unwinding a purple thread while singing a lullaby called 'Soledad' (loneliness). In the minotaur's myth, the thread helps the hero to kill the minotaur and liberate the city. As I unwind that purple thread, singing my daughters' favourite lullaby, first with one hand, then with the other, I think of its connection with healing and self-love and also with identifying the kernel of my self-harm.

In a different scene of this bull, I represent an experience of revelation that I had one day while doing yoga: as I was lying down in *Shavasana* (a laydown meditation also called the 'corpse pose'), I felt my grandpa's vivid presence. I also heard a message in which he said to keep moving and that he is always with me. This experience happened a few years before my ATP, so putting it in the play was paramount. It showed that recovery is possible and that the awareness of the presence of my ancestors made all the difference for me. It is something I have never felt so vividly despite being so far away from where I came from.

The father bull

In this bull, I make four statue positions to represent some of the characteristics of being a father. For me, the immense love of becoming a dad for the first time was like an arrow that Cupid sent my way and hit me in a critical spot of my heart. The messiness of the role is represented by cleaning a diaper; its playful nature is defined by portraying the playful dad that I am (and that my father was for me during my early years). Finally, in the last image, I hold a baby in my arms, trying to ensure that the audience does not disturb her sleep.

By Blood (Rv) ended with me in the spotlight, making a final soliloquy to the audience by stating what this play was or was not about. For me, their role as witnesses with no expectations, no agendas allowed me to submerge in the messiness of the (symbolic) blood. Receiving the blessing of being watched with an open heart was one of my most immense privileges.

DISCUSSION

The performers/authors presented in this article have several points in common: they were dramatherapy students performing as part of their training; they were born in Spanish-speaking countries and moved to non-Spanish-speaking places, thus conceiving their pieces in the diaspora. In all cases, the process was informed by Susana Pendzik's approach – herself a migrant, born in a Spanish-speaking country. Yet, some intersectional features emphasize

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their diversity. Among others, Ida and Ramón emigrated to the United States, Elke to Switzerland. Ramón and Elke moved for personal reasons, whereas Ida emigrated for economic reasons. Elke was born to a bicultural family and was reared as bilingual. Ida and Elke are self-identified as cisgender women, Ramón as cisgender male. Elke and Ramón are parents to children. These differences and similarities surely inform each author's diasporic experiences and therefore their pieces.

Reflecting on their process, we have arrived at three mega-themes that are embedded in all three pieces and that also resonate with Brubaker's (2005), Meerzon's (2012) and Meerzon and Wilmer's (2023) postulates regarding diasporic experiences and exilic theatre. The core themes are language, cultural identity and ancestry.

Language

Language is often a source of tension in diasporic theatre, as artists need to decide between being communicative or remaining faithful to their mother tongue, but unintelligible to the receiving audience (Carlson 2000; Meerzon 2012). In Ramón's piece, the opposition between Spanish and English is palpable. The mere fact that English was a requirement elicited strong feelings of inadequacy and failure. As he states in his reflections, it was his 'final test', and his provocative first appearance on stage dressed as a *torero*, asking the audience whose blood they came to see, powerfully captures the intensity of these feelings. Dokter and Sajnani stress the importance of dramatherapists to enable 'clients to speak their own language and see a powerful other struggling to understand' (2023: 122). Ramón develops the scene about the 'villain teacher', in which his academic hardships were the target of mockery. Peculiarly, these contents may have contributed to Ramón's subsequent recognition of his ADHD. Ramón's deployment of the multilingual biblical text may also be seen as a means to express linguistic complexity and confusion, reclaiming the legitimacy of using unintelligible languages that the receiving audience does not understand.

Bakhtin defines *heteroglossia* as a discursive device that expresses the coexisting and diverse voices of author/character in a narrative. Based on this concept, Meerzon refers to *dramatic heteroglossia* as an aesthetic strategy used by immigrants, which 'can illuminate the complexity of an authorial utterance in autobiographical solo performance, in which the voice of the author, the voice of the performer, and the voice(s) of the character(s) are simultaneously diversified and intertwined' (2015: 291). Ida's piece expresses a sort of dramatic heteroglossia through the narrator's unapologetic and constant swapping from Spanish to English and the integration of an animated self-image to describe her journey to the United States, which stands in sharp contrast to powerful body-focused scenes.

Performing diasporic theatre offers an opportunity to experiment in tongues, 'switching codes and practicing various degrees of self-translation' (Meerzon 2012: 44). Although translating was one of the first 'implied roles' in Elke's life, in a clear choice to remain authentic to the language of her female ancestors, Elke's presentation to a primarily non-Spanish-speaking audience was done almost entirely in Spanish. The piece begins in German with her daughter's opening voice-over: 'I was in my *mami*'s belly, and my *mami* was in my *abue*'s belly' and closes elegantly with a Haiku in German. The choice of the words in Spanish '*mami*' and '*abue*', filtered through the voice of her

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German-born daughter reflects Elke's transgenerational bilingualism. As it happens to many children of immigrants who have to grapple with various linguistic and cultural codes, Elke's role as translator is represented in her ATP, in her finding an aesthetic form that enables the audience to understand: the outer framework in German provides enough context for people to grasp the Spanish meaning.

Cultural identity

The three ATPs deal with identity and culture issues. Idalmis's piece begins with the description of two islands: Cuba and Manhattan. As drone shots of both islands are shown, we hear Ida's voice-over reciting a poem that continuously swings between Spanish and English, like sea-waves, articulating the essence of each island for the author/narrator. Performing places of origin, transitioning between spaces and border-crossing are characteristic of diasporic theatre (Afolabi 2021), to the extent that diasporic spaces are perceived as a relational space, 'a zone of interaction that is inflected by memory and imagination as well as the materialities of migration' (Lo and Gilbert 2010: 153). The entire piece revolves around Ida's shifting identities as she migrates to herself. Her journey combines lived experienced scenes (immigration at the airport) with inner processes (her inner child, the ritual). As Meerzon (2012) states, exilic theatre tends to favour post-dramatic structures (Lehmann 2006), presenting disjointed narratives that oscillate between inner states and outer world, memories and present. In the constant tension between continuity and difference, belonging and foreignness, the artist expresses a never-ending call for 'remaking one's identity and thus performing the act of self-fashioning' (Meerzon 2017: 29).

Ramón was aware of the difficulty of transmitting cultural experiences to a foreign audience, not only due to language but also regarding constitutive historical events (Spanish Civil War) and cultural traditions (bullfights). Meerzon remarks that diasporic theatre often takes inspiration from cultural-mythical sources, reintroducing 'the ontology of Greek myth and Christian allegory as a parable of the exilic self' (2012: 297). Ramón's ATP is full of allusions to Greek mythology, Christian symbolism and Spanish cultural heritage, such as the story of Cain and Abel, the figure of the minotaur and Goya's painting. These contents evolved spontaneously and organically from the ATP process as *universal resonances* (Pendzik 2022) generated by the exploration of his personal experiences. Drawing on intertextual-cultural roots attest to Ramón's need to assert his cultural identity through these powerful archetypal images. Furthermore, despite his lack of knowledge regarding bullfighting, and with the awareness that in the liberal community of his audience, this was going to be difficult to digest, Ramón makes the aesthetic choice of using the *corridas* as an organizing structure for his piece. This provocative act reflects the mechanism of 'boundary maintenance', marking his cultural alterity and voicing 'the preservation of a distinctive identity vis-à-vis a host society' (Brubaker 2005: 6) – even at the risk of being misinterpreted or rejected.

In contrast to Ramón and Ida, Elke was raised as Mexican-German. A multicultural identity not only involves exposure to more than one culture but also requires identification, a sense of belonging to each of these cultures (Benet-Martínez et al. 2021). Elke's performance took place in Switzerland – a country to which she had immigrated – hence a diasporic space for her. Elke's piece takes place 'on the move': her locus on stage is moving, climbing up and

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down props, jumping from one place to the other. Like Davis's (2022) use of a balancing board to express her experience of in-betweenness, Elke's romantic quest for a 'home' is reflected through her constant travelling on stage. Articulating a theatrical image of diasporic dispersion in the dramatic space, Elke's searching for 'home' finally hits the conclusion that other diasporic artists have arrived at before her, that home 'is not a place, but is rather represented by people, traditions, and beliefs' (Rudakoff 2017: 7) and that it is 'more of a process of longing than a place of belonging' (Zarif 2017: 140).

Ancestors

Ancestry is often an active theme in diasporic imagination and theatre (Meerzon 2012, 2017; Meerzon and Wilmer 2023; Rudakoff 2017), appearing both as collective ancestry (García Martín 2017; Stanlake 2023) and/or in the form of personal ancestors (Zarif 2017). ATP exploration of ancestry has been done particularly in the context of transgenerational or historical trauma (Volkas 2016; Miramonti and Millán Gil 2022; Raucher et al. 2024). However, ancestry is not a core topic in every ATP. In fact, in one author's experience (Susana), some people report feeling uncomfortable or aloof exploring ancestral roots in their ATPs, preferring instead to focus on events from their personal past, such as relationships, immediate family or other issues.

Diasporic ATP cannot afford to disengage from ancestral roots, as this topic appears to be central to therapeusis (Volkas 2016). Noticeably, the three ATPs explored in this article profoundly engage with ancestry. Ida's draws on her Afro-Cuban Orishas from the Yoruba religion: *Oshún*, deity of the rivers and sweet waters, fertility, love and sensuality, and *Yemayá*, mother of all the Orishas, goddess of the ocean and the seas (Verger 1981). In the ritual scene, Ida's ancient and new selves walk in nature, hand in hand. Embodying her ancestral goddesses, she experiences spiritual healing. In Yoruba belief, the archetypal Orisha also becomes manifest idiosyncratically, incarnating in each individual person (Lepine 1981). Furthermore, she experiences initiation into her role as a healer, as reflected by her acquired ability to accompany someone else in the ritual. In her reflections, Ida refers to the prominent place that water has had in her life as an islander, sharing the story of her father's ashes. A deep therapeutic transformation has been achieved through ancestral work that connected her body and spirit: Ida finds in her body a 'home', a sort of 'third space' that generates 'new forms of identity for marginalized and culturally displaced subjects' (Pindi 2018: 24).

Ramón's piece also draws on ancestry, tapping into the aching heart of Spain's historical and collective trauma of the Civil War, and interlacing it with his Catholic roots. In this way, the stories of his personal ancestors are not recounted as a private experience but contextualized in the collective realm. The transgenerational approach posits that events that occurred in past generations are genealogically transmitted, often through unconscious means. This is particularly important in psychotherapy, for unelaborated traumas tend to remain in some kind of 'cultural unconscious', affecting a person's psyche and current life, often causing psychosomatic symptoms or other unexplained hardships (Schützenberger 2009). Volkas (2014) states that people 'carry their parents', grandparents' and ancestors' pain, and until that pain is grieved fully, the legacy continues to be passed on to the next generation' (2014: 42). Ramón's ceremonial scene of the burial of his assassinated family members is as much an attempt to engage fully with the grief caused by their brutal deaths

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as it is a dramatic and therapeutic gesture to create a meaningful commemoration, which was missing from his life. In his own words, the topic has been hardly addressed in his family, as in many other families. Taking inspiration from two ancestral sources for the ritual, he creates a sacred space on stage, establishing an altar with candles in which his ancestors can be commemorated with a martial salute for his military ancestors and with prayers for all. Carnabucci and Anderson (2012) refer to the therapeutic effects of establishing ancestral altars – a common practice in many cultures. However, the fact that this intimate moment is performed publicly on stage is paramount in ATP and has a powerful healing effect on Ramón. The ancestral bull, the first in his performance, paves the way for other issues to be addressed, including his new identity as a father.

Elke's piece explores the matrilineal branch of her family. The fact that the women are her 'Mexican side' connects her deeply with this cultural root of her ancestry. Elke's wobbly journey on stage contrasts with her grandma's immutable position centre stage, creating a tension between the liminal space generated by her constant moving around in search for 'home' and her grandmother's rooted presence. Dolan (2006) defines 'utopian performatives' as

> [S]mall, specific and profound moments in performance that beckon the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking and intersubjectively intense.
>
> (Dolan 2006: 165)

One such moment occurred in the general rehearsal, when the bells of a nearby church rang in synchronicity with Elke's grandma's death on stage. This solemn moment brought alive not only the ancestral spirit of the grandmother, but a bigger aspect of her spiritual being, her profoundly religious vein. This colossal force resonated in Elke's psyche, making her feel as though her own heart had stopped – and then surrender to the feelings of love and appreciation that emanated from her heart.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As an aesthetic format that fosters therapeutic transformation, the application of ATP to diasporic contexts organically taps into diasporic experiences 'in need of healing' (even without specifically looking out for them). Although the individual circumstances and the framework of each ATP presented in this article differed considerably, the similarities regarding diasporic topics abound. In coincidence with nontherapeutic forms of diasporic autobiographical performances, language, cultural identity and ancestry were common territory for all three. However, the exploration of ancestry seemed to be a crucial axis leading to therapeutic insight and change – above the other two topics. Perhaps this relates to the fact that therapeusis is deliberately pursued in ATP (Pendzik et al. 2016), in contrast to diasporic autobiographical performances that tend to focus more on social justice or activist aspects. Ancestry seems to be a mandatory stop in diasporic ATP, as it evokes a deep layer of complexity that holds a psychological knot requiring therapeutic attention. This layer is not only personal, but perhaps can be located in the collective unconscious suggested by Jung (1980).

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Another insight dug from our reflections concerns the relational nature of 'home' and its connection to the 'always migratory identity' (Spry 2001: 706). Perhaps this is a general, human feature, but the diasporic experience punctuates this fact even more, as actual space becomes relativized, and the concept of a unanimous 'home' is deconstructed, dispersed and pluralized. Home is the body, is a web of people, is the journey itself.

Finally, each ATP was healing and revealing to its author/performer, and furthermore, it accompanied them overtime and keeps being relevant, with added layers of understanding. This is why, as in any ATP, it is essential to end the piece with a 'therapeutic horizon' (not to be confused with a merry ending) (Pendzik 2013: 19) that would grant the protagonists a sense of hope and possibility.

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